

Report on Listening Circles
December 18, 2022
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We held sixteen listening circles between October 16 and December 11, including virtual and targeted circles (BIPOC people, parents, and youth), as well as a handful of individual conversations. We heard from a total of 116 participants, including thirteen BIPOC participants. People from the LGBTIQ+ community, members whose connections are entirely virtual, and people with disabilities were represented, though perhaps not in the numbers we would desire. New members and even those who are not yet members were included, though older members were more common.

The themes and recommendations in this report draw primarily on those meetings, with additional input based on observation and conversations outside the circles.

Worship and Music

The most commonly mentioned appreciation in all areas of church life was music, with both variety and quality being praised along with Brent Baldwin's leadership of the music program for more than two decades.

Sermons were appreciated a bit less, though still significantly; both Rev. Meg Barnhouse and Rev. Davidson Loehr were specifically mentioned, as was ritual and collaborative services. Some members named a lack of spirituality, and one commented that "entertainment feels more important than spiritual experience."

It should be noted that attendance is up from last year, as described in Rev. Chris's report.

Religious Education and Family Ministry

Religious education staff, especially Kelly Stokes, was universally praised. One participant commented: "We couldn't ask for better RE staff. We could ask for more, but not better." A number of people mentioned the need for more adult religious education opportunities, while also appreciating Wellspring and Chalice Circles. The Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality program is deeply appreciated by adults and youth and seen as a potential way to bring more people into the church. Parents desire more opportunities to connect with and support one another, and youth want to have more connection to the church through social justice and other activities. The youth expressed missing friends who have yet to return to church from the pandemic and hope that the church will encourage them to return in person and grow the youth groups again.

Church Organization

Communication came up strongly as a need for improvement. The website is not easy to navigate to find answers for searchers, whether new people or established members. Members are not sure how to get involved and are concerned that guests may have an even harder time.

The building and grounds are not as appealing as desired. Though appreciative of the new expansion, the contrast can make other parts of the building – notably, the RE wing – appear shabbier.

Staffing levels are a concern. Many efforts that members would like to make are challenged because of lack of staff support.

Church Culture

Despite the challenges of the last few years – construction, pandemic, and losing Rev. Meg Barnhouse, much beloved, to retirement – the spirit and commitment of the church are strong, as demonstrated by the successful stewardship drive this fall. There is also a sense that the congregation comes together well to face difficulty and even controversy, as it did in the dismissal of Rev. Loehr some years ago. Since that event, the Covenant of Healthy Relations was identified as a significant factor in improved atmosphere. Some feel that there is a growing culture of generosity.

Many feel strongly connected to the church through friendships and community within specific groups.

Many members hold on to programs and approaches that have been successful in the past. Fewer are thinking about how to better use contemporary opportunities, such virtual options. Much of what people say they want is to resurrect various activities that existed pre-COVID, such as Forum and Paradox Players. That is a natural response to the upheaval of the last few years. However, youth had a slightly different view. They mentioned social media like TikTok, Discord, and Instagram (though they also advocate for a return to rallies and lock-ins). Creating a balance between past and future will require discernment.

Desire for outreach, besides around racial and cultural diversity, centered most strongly around outreach to college students.

Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism

A significant number of people mentioned wanting to have a diverse, multicultural church. At the same time, despite passage of the 8th principle, members seem reluctant to address racist structures and practices, or uncertain how to do so. Often, members embraced the idea of a multi-racial church while not wanting to see much change in the institution. Some BIPOC members report that though they are initially welcomed with enthusiasm, the welcome cools once they have joined. Some report unpleasant and even harmful experiences with White members and leaders. There remains pain for BIPOC members around losing Rev. Marisol Caballero, as well as the departure of other BIPOC church members.

The question occurs, “Why do we want diversity?” If it’s to be more relevant or representative of the local demographics, then it’s largely to make ourselves feel good. If it’s to share Unitarian Universalism as broadly as we can and to serve the people in our community, we have a better grounding to start with. Being of service to others’ needs rather than our own comfort will support the goals of diversity, inclusion and equity.

Social Justice

Similarly, people prize having a church involved with Social Justice. More than a dozen people mentioned giving sanctuary to immigrants and/or work with Austin Sanctuary Network as high points. One said the church “followed our values and showed what we stand for” in making the decision to offer sanctuary. Many were moved by the moment the congregation made the decision to begin offering sanctuary. However, the number of people actually involved in that work does not reflect the strong sense of support. One participant appreciated, “angry people who are passionate about important issues,” adding, “I can rely on them to volunteer for social action related things.”

The Social Justice Committee has a substantial targeted email list within the church. Many people have been involved in the past with Habitat for Humanity, freeze nights, and making sandwiches for ARCH, and have valued those experiences. Often, the work included an opportunity for social connection, so people felt a connection to their church and other members through the work.

The youth requested more opportunities for kids and teens to volunteer and be involved in social justice and community service, from making care packets for unhoused people to connecting with the initiatives the adults pursue via Social Action Council.

What we are already doing:

1. Revitalize committees for lay pastoral care (First UU Cares), Right Relations and membership. Discussions are underway about revivals of Forum and return to a second service.
2. Working towards better communications, with Chris’ visual blogs and with pending reallocation of staff.
3. Plans for adult RE in the winter and spring are coming together, including the Trans Inclusion curriculum grounded in broad anti-oppression values.
4. Grounds committee is getting that aspect of the church in better shape.
5. Developing a realistic plan for full staffing to be phased in over time.
6. Bringing explicit multicultural framework to worship, i.e. encouraging more lay leadership, inviting BIPOC guest ministers, diverse sources for music and readings, Beloved Community as a lens through which we interpret all themes. Also, volunteer-led BIPOC group and BIPOC families group are returning.

Recommendations:

1. Build on strengths rather than problems. What you pay attention to grows. Bring all other programs (building, religious education, administration) up to the same level of support as music. That will produce that same level of excellence.
2. Work with the UUA Commission on Institutional Change's report "Widening the Circle of Concern" https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/w/widening_the_circle-text_with_covers.pdf to find next steps on anti-racism work. As we develop those plans, we strongly recommend church leadership, volunteers, and listening circle participants take the Trans Inclusion course in 2023, as a next step in deepening church culture of 8th principle.
3. Be pro-active and intentional about connecting with people who attend primarily virtually. Keep in mind their needs, keeping some activities virtual and/or hybrid, so they can stay involved. Growing social media presence could also be helpful in cementing these connections.
4. Develop a comprehensive communications strategy that addresses internal, external and targeted communication, and includes website redesign, social media strategies, newsletter, and creative forms of outreach.
5. The question that remains in social justice work is how to seriously tackle issues of justice once a position has been defined. The church needs to develop a deeper understanding of the roles of direct service, advocacy, and creating change in making the world a better place. In his book *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois asks, "How does it feel to be a problem?" It's a question to contemplate as FUUCA strives for deeper understanding of issues being engaged and the people being affected by those issues.

Finally, we hope that many of you will attend the January 14 workshop, "First UU History." The goal is to understand and process the ways the past has shaped the present, and may influence the future of the church. We need to have voices from those who remember the past as well as those grounded in the present. Childcare will be available.